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This paper argues that western instructors of public speaking courses, along with those in the forensics community, can benefit from the insights offered by the eastern tradition. Examining the Indian religious text, the "Bhagavad Gita," reveals insights that can change the way message construction, audience empathy, and speaker motivation are covered in western courses. The ideal use of public discourse ceases to be solely a success-related instrument, and instead becomes a means of sharing one's being with others. (Contains 23 references.) (Author/RS)

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Teaching Public Speaking: Insights from the Eastern World

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This paper argues that western instructors of public speaking courses, along with those in the forensics community, can benefit from the insights offered by the eastern tradition. Examining the Indian religious text, the *Bhagavad Gita*, reveals insights that can change the way message construction, audience empathy, and speaker motivation are covered in western courses. The ideal use of public discourse ceases to be solely a success-related instrument, and instead becomes a means of sharing one's being with others.

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Teaching Public Speaking: Insights from the Eastern World

Introduction

Teachers of public speaking often see their duty as one of importance; they are charged with the task of empowering individuals to speak their mind and stand up for their views. Thus, the public speaking course has often found its way into general education requirements of universities due to its "usefulness" for a variety of student types (and majors). While the author of this paper readily acknowledges the power and effectiveness of good public speaking skills through his own experience in forensics competition, coaching, and public speaking instruction, this paper shall take a different approach to some of the base assumptions within a public speaking course. The purpose here is not to tear down these edifices, but instead to expand the message that is given to public speaking students. The way I propose to do this is through a brief examination of a seminal eastern text, the *Bhagavad Gita*. While this Indian religious work does not represent all possible eastern (or Indian) views, it still provides a non-western foil for the approaches many public speaking teachers may use. Specifically, this text shall be described and contextualized. Then, important insights as to message construction, audience empathy, and speaker motivation shall be discussed, with the goal being to expand the resources of public speaking professionals (and those of rhetorical critics, as well).

The *Bhagavad Gita*

The *Bhagavad Gita* is an ancient eastern text that has been the leading emissary of Hindu ideas to the Western world. Minor (1986) indicates that it is the most translated book in the world after the Bible. It also was reputed to be Gandhi's favorite text, one that he read on a daily basis. Radhakrishnan (1998) adds that it is the most popular religious poem in Sanskrit. Deutsch (1968) and Zimmer (1989) argue that it is a significant piece of Hindu philosophical work because it synthetically combines many previous themes into its narrative. Some of these include the illusory nature of the phenomenal world, the self, and issues of dharma (duty) that are prevalent in Hinduism (Cross, 1994; Smith, 1986). The *Bhagavad Gita* begins as a martial narrative about a localized war and quickly transforms into a dialogue transcending any particular context of human existence (Neufeld, 1986).

It is important to realize that this relatively short work is situated in the midst of a longer, more literary work entitled the *Mahabharata* (Babbili, 1997). This epic is eight times larger than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined. The focus of this larger work was an epic power struggle between two factions of a warring family, the Kurus. Eventually, this family is drawn to war; this is where the *Bhagavad Gita* begins. Set against the backdrop of war, the dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna provide the audience with access to ideas covering all human existence. Arjuna begins to question whether he should fight his own family, even if the war appears to be for a just cause. Krishna counsels him, and the dialogue focuses on this thematic persuasion.

One important aspect to keep in mind about the *Bhagavad Gita* is that it has no known historical author (Deutsch, 1968). While typically attributed to the mythical sage Vyasa, Western audiences are constantly "annoyed by the untidy historical consciousness of the Indians"(Deutsch, 1968, p. 4) in not keeping a "true" record of the author of this piece. This interesting fact should not derail critical investigation; part of the power of

this cross-cultural artifact is in its ability to affect individuals through its almost archetypal narrative message.

This work is laid out in short verses, which shall be cited by book/discourse number and verse number (i.e. 9:23). While many excellent translations exist for the *Bhagavad Gita* (Deutsch, 1968; Edgerton, 1995), this paper shall refer to the translation by Easwaren (1985).

Insights into Public Speaking Instruction

This paper argues that there are three main insights that can be taken from the eastern text, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and can yield insight into how to teach public speaking. Specifically, this text elucidates the importance of message construction, audience empathy, and speaker motivation.

Message Construction

Speech Instruction texts, such as Lucas' (1998) excellent book, often advise students to chose a topic, carefully consider the purpose of the speech, and then build the strongest case for it. Sometimes, discussions of Aristotle's appeals (ethos, pathos, logos) make their appearance. From the author's experience, even these measures tend toward a "logocentrism" of the speech; arguments and logic are considered constant and distinct guides to speech construction. For instance, by thinking about one's topic and clearly formulating its "purpose," students could be fooled into thinking they will have created the *telos* of communicative utterances on that topic.

An insight that is readily available in the *Bhagavad Gita* is that one should construct his or her message (speech) for the type of audience to be persuaded, informed, etc. While this factor of audience analysis is prevalent in Lucas (1998), the subtle distinction can be shown in Krishna's approach to persuading Arjuna. Arjuna, having lost his original will to fight the opposing sections of his family, sets down his mighty weapon and asks Krishna if it would not be more noble to die than to fight. Krishna's response to this rhetorical situation is quite interesting; upon a westerner's first perusal of this whole text, Krishna's message would be judged to be internally inconsistent and contradictory. For instance, early in the conversation, Krishna tells Arjuna "There has never been a time when you and I and the kings gathered here have not existed, nor will there be a time when we will cease to exist" (2:12). Shortly after this stanza, Krishna indicates that "You [Arjuna] were never born; you will never die" (2:20). Not only do these statements fly in the face of much [western] intuitive knowledge, but also they seem to contradict themselves in the use of terms such as "existence" and "death." While this contradiction can be sorted out through detailed philosophical analysis, other appeals are more glaring.

Early in the dialogue, Krishna tells Arjuna that his lack of courage in regard to this war is "mean and unworthy of you, Arjuna" (2:2). Also, Arjuna's reservations are tied to the perception of the empirical body as constituitive of the individual self; Krishna argues that the true self is in all things and is unchanging. After these arguments, Krishna tells Arjuna that not fighting would be imprudent; "if you do not participate in this battle against evil, you will incur sin, violating your dharma and your honor" (2:33).

Later in the dialogue, these arguments give way to Krishna's plea that Arjuna uphold his dharma (duty) and not worry about the consequences (fruits) of his actions. This seems like substantive contradiction in regard to the previous consequentialist reasoning Krishna provides Arjuna. How is one to explain this seemingly confusing

technique of argumentation and speech construction? Agrawal (1992) argues that Krishna takes a progressive argumentative stance in offering Arjuna reasons why his original position of fighting this just war is decent to hold. Krishna offers emotional reasons, prudential reasons, and finally, culminates with moral reasons why Arjuna should fight this war. Thus, contradiction dissolves into varying stages of argumentative competence concerning Arjuna; at earlier stages, Krishna appeals to the emotional fears and worries of Arjuna, as a warrior and a noble. Only later in the discourse is Arjuna prepared for "deeper," more intellectual reasons concerning the nature of the world.

Perhaps speech instruction should follow a similar model in some cases. Knowing the demographic make-up of one's audience is important (Lucas, 1998). The insight that the *Bhagavad Gita* gives is that different audiences might be ready and receptive to different levels of arguments at different times. For instance, if one is addressing members of a hostile picket line, tempers may be such that "lower" level appeals to emotion may be effective by themselves, or as a precursor to more logical arguments. In the text, Arjuna is given comparatively more "powerful" reasons as the discourse goes on; perhaps students could model this and save their most powerful reasons/points for later in their speech. Additionally, Agrawal (1992) takes Arjuna's caste, that of the warrior/leader, as crucial to Krishna's argumentative approach. Not only is the issue (to fight or not to fight) directed by Arjuna's "essence" as a man of action, but also the arguments that can affect him. Krishna sees his reliance on courage, valor, honor in the afterlife, etc. as being effective avenues of persuasion. It is only at the end that the "true" climax of Krishna's address is seen—Arjuna must uphold his dharma because this world is illusory and that doing one's dharma selflessly leads to salvation. Consideration of an audience in regard to the arguments they *will* accept and those they *can* accept is warranted in public speaking situations.

Another interesting facet to this text is the use of contradiction, as indicated above. While one can "explain away" the contradictions in Krishna's arguments through the "progressive approach" strategy, new avenues for speech content could be opened up if contradiction was not totally shunned in communication contexts. One major contradiction is "while one of the main purposes of the Gita is to convince Arjuna that he must do his duty and fight, the Gita also contains many clear statements in favour of non-violence" (Kapferer, 1987, p. 129). Zimmer (1989) argues that these contradictions are fertile grounds for the beginning of Indian philosophical speculation; as paired opposites, these statements are "not an end to thought, but a beginning" (Kapferer, 1987, p. 131). O'Flaherty (1973) points out that Indian thought sees contradictions as a relationship necessary to identity. While public speaking students need not be bogged down in Derridain discussions of *différánce* and inherent linguistic opposition, contradictions could be used as interesting starting points and rhetorical devices. Wittgenstein (1953) notices a similar point; contradictions, while "logically reprehensible," can be pragmatically fruitful in stimulating novel ideas and lines of thought. In a similar vein, speech topics could be "invented" and explored from the starting point of fundamental contradictions/oppositions that are involved in issues of belief, action, etc. (especially on a societal level).

Audience Empathy

The more important insights within this works address the ontologies and relationships between the speaker and the audience. Beebe and Beebe (2000), Lucas

(1998), Verderber (1991) and other speech texts always include sections on audience analysis—albeit justified by the pragmatic standards of consequence and efficacy. Jaffe (2001) displays the emphasis placed on this, stating in the Introductory section, "The skills needed for *effectiveness* in these two roles—as speaker and as listener—are the focus of this text" (p. 4, emphasis added). The word "effectiveness" is obviously a teleological term in this context; one is seen by such texts as being *effective* in achieving some end. The framework for this teleological approach to public speaking is established by Aristotle's (1991) formulation of rhetoric as "the power to observe the persuasiveness of which any particular matter admits" (p. 74). The audience exists as a natural impediment to the instantiation of the speaker's goals. Speech serves its purpose when it is effectively adapted to the conditions of the audience and occasion in order to achieve the speaker's goals. While the textbooks cited above are excellent teaching tools, there message seems to missing something in the overt reliance on western ideals of speech teleology; it is at this point that eastern views can allow for pedagogical evolution.

The *Bhagavad* Gita conveys the important message that one should see him or herself in others; the individual self, contrary to our western heritage, is seen as an illusion blocking enlightenment. This insight into the nature of humanity and existence can be valuable for the empathy that is due to an audience of a public speaking situation. In this text, the real meaning of one's "self" is conceived in relation to the "ultimate" self, personified by Krishna in human guise. It is this self that is described as "The Self of all beings"(2:30). Krishna continues this explanation by saying "I [Krishna as the personification of ultimate self] am ever present to those who have realized me in every creature…all life [is] my manifestation"(6:30). Even the creatures themselves (including humans) are all fundamentally united with the ultimate self; "I am the true Self in the heart of every creature, Arjuna, and the beginning, middle, and end of their existence"(10:20).

Krishna is arguing that humans deny their ontological unity with all things because of this illusion of ego individuation. Krishna exclaims to Arjuna that "I am time, the destroyer of all; I have come to consume the world. Even without your participation, all the warriors gathered here will die…I have already slain all these warriors; you will only be my instrument"(11:32-33). Arjuna is too attached to the illusion that what happens with his physical body on this empirical battlefield is real; Krishna is revealing to him the ultimate self that lies within every part of this phenomenal world. Krishna counsels Arjuna to accept the reality of the ultimate, undivided self in all; "He alone sees truly who sees the Lord the same in every creature, who sees the Deathless in the hearts of all that die"(13:27). The message here is that our individuation, a key element in the speaker-message-audience process model, is an obstacle to living well. The solution, according to the *Bhagavad Gita*, is to see oneself in all others.

Public speaking instructors could use this intuition to broach the subject of audience analysis and empathy. Instead of solely relying on appeals to "treat the audience nice or they will not be persuaded/listen to your message," the approach could instead begin with the more sensitive empathy embodied in the *Bhagavad Gita*. If one sees part of himself or herself in your audience, then there are reasons to treat them with kindness, empathy, and consideration while delivering a speech. Instead of making content understandable for purely pragmatic purposes, students of public speaking should craft and deliver their speeches with the intention of recognizing the humanity in their

audience and in appealing to that noble quality. For instance, the attitude of a speaker presenting a persuasive speech against abortion should not be to "overcome" or "subdue" the "hostile" impulses of his or her pro-choice audience, but instead should embody a whole-hearted desire to communicate a reasoned truth with these reasonable people. If the speaker does a good job at presenting his or her thoughts, his or her audience should accept the speech and its invitation to change, just as the speaker would hope they could be swayed to attitudinal change by reasoned discussion. Recognizing ourselves in our audience can lead to heuristic reflections on what it means to be an ethical speaker; just as the *Bhagavad Gita* cautions against selfish action, it also holds insights into why we should long for communicative interaction, as opposed to strategic manipulation of others through the instrument of speech (Habermas, 1984; Habermas, 1996). One is inherently similar, if not metaphysically identical, with his or her audience; this attitude and its implications should be cultivated in public speaking students through the insights offered by the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Speaker Motivation

The idea of what motivates one to give a speech is also a key area of concern in public speaking classes. Teachers emphasize that all walks of life and all types of jobs will require public speaking skills at some moment—Lucas (1998) even recommends the students be lead in a visualization exercise to imagine how their vocations might call upon them to "shine" with their public speaking skills. Taking a similar lead, Adler and Rodman (2000) point out that "effective speaking" is equivalent to "Influenc[ing] your audience to accomplish your goal" (p. 301). The western view of public speaking is summed up in their dictum that in order to "influence your listeners . . . you have to change them in some way" (p. 301). Thus, public speaking courses and texts often extend this notion of goal orientation and of bringing about change in the audience that is congruent with the wishes of the speaker. Adler and Rodman (2000) point out that there are three main purposes for public speaking and its relationship toward the audience. Speakers aim to persuade the audience, inform the audience, or to entertain the audience. A command and control attitude is definitely enshrined in this goal-oriented approach to "audience centered" public speaking. This paper, if it argues anything, hopes to convey the eastern idea that action (such as public speaking) is not solely aimed at producing "fruit" or desirable consequences. While this goal-oriented aim is a key element in the civic use of public oratory, insights on a desirable attitude within the speaker can be gleaned from the *Bhagavad Gita*.

In this text, Krishna counsels Arjuna that "You have the right to work, but never to the fruit of work. You should never engage in action for the sake of reward, nor should you long for inaction. Perform work in this world, Arjuna, as a man established within himself—without selfish attachments, and alike in success and defeat" (2:47-48). The belief in the primacy of one's self, as mentioned above, is attacked here; Krishna points out that the empirical illusion of the self should prompt one toward acting within this world, but without selfish attachments to the consequences of one's action. The question becomes, how can one act in a speech situation without concerns for goals, success, and his or her ends?

Sartwell's (1993) analysis of the *Gita*'s conception of action provides a way out of this paradox. He argues that even inaction is considered action by this text—Krishna states "there is no one who rests for even an instant; every creature is driven to action by

his own nature" (3:5). Sartwell (1993) argues that Krishna suggests "it is not that we act wholly and always without ends; that would make human action impossible. Rather, we ought to reconstrue the *relation* of means to ends in our actions...our action should not be performed *merely* for the sake of the end; the end must not absorb or expunge the means in our deliberation"(p. 97). Our sole focus on ends in action is amply illustrated by Sartwell's (1993) arguing that

> If we could achieve the end by sheer force of will, if we could realise it without performing the means, we would. Krsna [Krishna] asks us, not to renounce all desire and thus all action, but to desire the means as intrinsically valuable as *well* as valuable in service of the end. The means are not to be absorbed in the end; the time and energy devoted to the means are not wasted. Rather, this time and energy are to be *consecrated*. (pp. 97-98)

Human action, far from being a stranger to goal-orientation, must be seen a holy, worthy undertaking that also gives us value. Valuing action only so far as it achieves a certain end transforms that spent time into *wasted* time if the goal is not achieved.

How does this conception of action apply to public speaking instruction? Teachers of public speaking must try to capture this insight of action in their attempts to frame the very act of speaking in the public sphere; the students must see the value to speaking above and beyond the goal-oriented approached proffered by so many texts. As Sartwell summarizes, "If one devotes one's life to achieve such ends, one has wasted one's life up to the moment the end is achieved. If one succeeds, one has been absent from one's life up to that point . . . if one *fails* to achieve such ends . . . one has not been *present* in one's life at all, but has lived in devotion to a moment that has never arrived" (p.98). The value in public speaking lies not only in the ability of one to persuade or move others to action or belief; this would leave the act of speaking meaningless if the goal was not achieved. Following the lead of the *Bhagavad Gita*, students should be instructed that the means of speaking are intrinsically valuable and, as such, should be considered a "ritual" to be revered. This eastern idea is not so foreign to western classes as it may seem; our liberal tradition often praises the individual's ability to express him or herself and his or her needs to others.

A stronger stance could be conveyed, however, that the giving of a speech is an art, a creative act that has value above its ability to affect its audience. If this idea can be conveyed to western audience, as career-oriented as they are, the attitudes for giving speeches can be changed from emphasis on an effective tool for personal empowerment (persuasion, informative, etc.) to a mode of being. Career and personal goals can be chased through the "tool" of public speaking, but the *Bhagavad Gita* seems to reserve an intrinsic enjoyment of the speech by the speaker, regardless of the results upon the audience. Thus, speaking students could be implored to enjoy the adrenaline rush of speaking, the fortune of a "captive audience" to their views (as is such in the classroom), and the opportunity and power to express themselves in this social environment they find surrounding them.

Conclusion

This exploratory paper has argued that some useful insights can be drawn from the eastern text, the *Bhagavad Gita*, for instructors of public speaking courses. While these insights will not fundamentally change the format or substance of public speaking instruction, they could very well help shape student's (and instructor's) attitudes toward

this facet of the communication discipline. What value do we as a discipline give to public speaking? In what is this value based? This paper has operated on the (mildly defended) assumption that most students and many instructors couch this ability of public expression in terms of its "market value." Instead of wooing students solely with statistics of how many "Fortune 500" companies rank the ability to speak as a key factor in hiring a new employee, the justification of such an important ability should be extended to cover its nature as action *qua* action. In the terms espoused by Habermas (1996), students should grasp this insight that expression through communicative action (public discourse) is not a tool to move people as if they are objects; instead, the defining ability of humans to consensually create shared social meaning should be consecrated as a intrinsically rewarding activity.

Ends should not be ignored, but they should not be the sole focus of public speaking instruction, either. This paper has argued the *Bhagavad Gita* can provide insights on public speaking instruction concerning issues of message construction, audience empathy, and speaker motivation. The message of this important text is that the speaker must, to some extent, let go of the self and emphasize with the ontology of the audience and shift focus from selfish concentration on goals to the ritual itself. The ideal use of public discourse ceases to be solely a success-related instrument, and instead becomes a means of sharing one's being with others. In this way, western courses on public speaking can gain from the ancient knowledge of the east in the form of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

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